

Chapter 1: AN OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM EVALUATION ACROSS THE STEPS PROGRAM

What are the basic requirements for program evaluation at the national, state, and community levels?

Program evaluation is defined as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future program development.”¹⁸ For the Steps Program, basic requirements for program evaluation span three categories of activity: 1) evaluation of each community-based program to meet the information needs of local stakeholders; 2) evaluation of the Steps Program as a whole to demonstrate accountability for use of public resources and results; and 3) participation in disease and risk factor surveillance as a source of data for program evaluation. Table 2 is a digest of work in each category of activity. The table includes responsibilities for CDC; state departments of health that coordinate programs in several communities; and Steps communities. These responsibilities range from completing specific tasks (e.g., data collection), to providing tangible support as others undertake the day to day work of program evaluation. For example, Steps communities participate annually in the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and biennially in the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). CDC provides technical assistance, and the state departments of health provide access to infrastructure or resources to support communities’ participation in these systems. This type of assistance promotes coordinated data collection and efficient use of resources at the state and community levels. While these data are important sources of information for local program planning, use of the BRFSS and YRBSS as primary sources of information for program evaluation also improves the quality and consistency of data collected program-wide.

Table 2. Requirements for Program Evaluation across the Steps to a HealthierUS Cooperative Agreement Program—Overview of Responsibilities and Activities

Responsible Party	Program Evaluation Activities			
		Evaluation of Individual Community Programs	Evaluation of the Steps Program as a Whole	Disease and Risk Factor Surveillance as a Data Source for Program Evaluation
	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical assistance to state departments of health or individual communities to support program evaluation planning, implementation, and use of findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate design and implementation of an evaluation of the Steps Program as a whole • Facilitate selection of core performance measures and indicators for use in all Steps communities • Facilitate and support data collection and reporting related to core performance measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical assistance to Steps communities to support participation in the BRFSS and YRBSS
	State departments of health that coordinate programs in multiple communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical assistance to individual communities to support program evaluation planning, implementation, or use of findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in design and implementation of an evaluation of the Steps Program as a whole • Participate in selection of core performance measures and indicators for use in all Steps communities • Facilitate and support data collection and reporting related to core performance measures • Provide state-level data required for reporting on core performance measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link communities to state-based resources that support their participation in the BRFSS and YRBSS • Assure that community-based surveillance activities are well coordinated with state-based surveillance activities
	Steps communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and implement an evaluation of their program • Collect and use data to meet local information needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in design and implementation of an evaluation of the Steps Program as a whole • Participate in selection of core performance measures and indicators for use in all Steps communities • Provide community-level data required for reporting on core performance measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect representative BRFSS and YRBSS data according to schedule

BRFSS: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

YRBSS: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

What is the scope of national-level program evaluation (i.e., the evaluation of the Steps Program as a whole)?

The primary purpose of national-level program evaluation is to demonstrate accountability for resources dedicated to the Steps Program. While accountability in public health is not a new concept, increasing competition for limited resources affirms the need to determine whether or not public dollars are well-used¹⁹. Thus, we use program evaluation findings to document use of public resources and results. Specifically, we document elements of program implementation and assess progress toward intended outcomes. Our evaluation questions further clarify the scope of this evaluation. These questions reflect a series of hard choices, made through a process of negotiating and prioritizing exactly which facets of the program to address. The primary evaluation questions are the following:

- (1) Were resources used to implement the Steps Program as intended?
- (2) Has the Steps Program made progress toward its intended outcomes?

Program stakeholders provided feedback on a wide range of topics to assure that data collected to answer these questions meets users' information needs and relevant practice standards.

Program stakeholders include those involved in program operations, those served or affected by the program, and primary users of the evaluation.²⁰ We include detailed documentation of the evaluation planning process in Appendix A.

How does national-level program evaluation relate to other evaluation activities across the Steps Program?

Program evaluation activities vary at the national, state, and community levels. However, these activities converge at one critical point: the need to demonstrate accountability for fiscal and human resources adequately. To that end, CDC staff and program stakeholders developed and implemented a shared set of core performance measures for use program-wide. As presented in Figure 3, the core performance measures represent the intersection of evaluation activities across the Steps Program.

While these measures are the primary component of national-level program evaluation, they are also an important factor in the evaluation of individual community programs. Furthermore, the core performance measures use data collected via disease and risk factor surveillance.

Figure 3. The Intersection of Evaluation Activities across the Steps to a HealthierUS Cooperative Agreement Program—Core Performance Measures

